

CV

NAME

Abubakar B. Jijiwa

DATE OF BIRTH

March 1961

CAREER

Mallam Abubakar Bobboyi Jijiwa was born in Fufore, Adamawa State, Nigeria. He holds a B.Sc. in accountancy and other qualifications in broadcasting, management and accountancy. He started out in 1977 as a Junior Producer in Gongola Broadcasting Corporation, Yola. In 1993, Jijiwa joined Voice of Nigeria as Director, Finance & Supplies. After serving as Commissioner of Finance, Economic Planning & Budget in the Adamawa State Government he returned to VON as Director, Administration & Finance, Acting Director-General. In March 2005, he was appointed substantive D-G/CEO. Jijiwa served as chair of various NGOs and has headed special committees and delegations in Nigeria and abroad. He is Chairman of Broadcasting Organisations of Nigeria and President of the Commonwealth Broadcasting Association.

MEDIA USE

Switches on the radio when he gets up – VON is not on air then so he listens to BBC and other large stations to help him compare

FAVOURITES

Family life with children is important, making sure he has time for them at the weekend. Enjoys the gym and swimming. Thinks the educated elite in Africa has a duty to give leadership and direction – so gets involved in community issues.



TELLING AFRICA'S STORY

Africa is not normally the source of encouraging news in the Western media. The Channel spoke to **Abubakar Jijiwa** who, as DG of one of Africa's largest external broadcasters, thinks it is important that there is more balance.

What's the background to the Voice of Nigeria?

Voice of Nigeria was set up in 1961, a year after Nigeria's independence, with the mandate of broadcasting to the outside world by radio. For a very long time, VON was a department of the National Broadcasting Corporation but in 1990 it became autonomous and a fully-fledged corporation, similar to the BBC World Service. Initially, VON broadcast in English, Arabic, French, and German and Hausa. At the moment we broadcast in eight languages – English, French, Arabic, Kiswahili, Hausa, Fulfulde, Igbo, Yoruba. Africa is the centrepiece of our broadcast distribution. We cover North, West and Central Africa very well, although we have some challenges in East and Southern Africa. We cover Europe and the Mediterranean basin effectively, as well as North America. We also get a lot of letters from East Asia and the Pacific region. For Arabic we target the North African countries and the Middle East.

Is the programming the same across the international languages and the African languages?

We are basically Afro-centric. We try to tell the stories coming out of both Nigeria and the rest of the continent. We emphasise the good stories coming out of Nigeria – you know Nigeria has had its image battered due to so many years of military rule. But as soon as we returned to democracy in 1990, we

tried to get our act together, maybe rather slowly but surely. Of course to our non-African audiences, in addition to taking the Nigerian viewpoint, we also want to tell the African viewpoint. In our programming we look at all countries in Africa.

VON is the largest external broadcaster in sub-Saharan Africa, with the exception of Channel Africa perhaps. Is there a synergy or collaboration between the two?

When SABC wanted to strengthen Channel Africa, they actually sent the head of Channel Africa to VON to observe our operations for two weeks – back in 2001. Since then we have signed a Memorandum of Understanding for programme exchange, co-productions and exchange of personnel. We have had a very active collaboration. Channel Africa is a newcomer – but they are progressing strongly and rapidly. We don't see them as competitors, we see ourselves as partners in the information delivery on Africa to the outside world and the African continent.

Regarding news from Africa, the big stories are Darfur, Kenya and Chad. Do you report on this for your listeners?

We sent a team to Kenya to cover the election and the first few weeks of the conflict. We share a common boundary with Chad and there is a very high influx of refugees into Nigeria, and so we have a natural interest in what is going on in Chad. We also have a lot of people of Nigerian origin in Sudan. We had a collaboration with Sudan radio but because of the complexity of the issues relating to Darfur we had to find independent ways of getting our own news. Each time the Nigerian peacekeepers are going to Darfur we have been able to send one of our journalists with them.

Which is more important – covering Africa for listeners in Africa, or to reach audiences in the rest of the world?

The world is getting smaller and smaller. VON started basically as a tool for de-colonisation, for a very long time our signals were beamed deliberately to the southern Africa region because we were concerned with apartheid and the colonial situation in those countries. What we are now looking at is prosperity for Africa, having good governments, making our leaders accountable. And from this perspective you can see that we cannot just target Africa, we must look at the other emerging economies, China, India. Europe will continue to be very important because a lot of Nigerians are there, working legitimately, but there are also illegal immigrants, and they are not good for the image of Nigeria. Our priority will continue to be to galvanise opinion within Africa, but it is also increasingly important that stories coming out of Africa are not just about dictatorship, military rule, famine, war and corruption.

You mentioned China a moment ago – China is very active in Africa. Do you see an opportunity to expand into Mandarin?

Absolutely. We are planning three new languages, Chinese and either Hindi or Urdu, and Portuguese as we also want to reach out to Lusophone Africa. The Chinese are already doing very well in their Hausa service of China Radio International. Hausa probably has capacity for 100m listeners, and that's why others are targeting in the Hausa language. We are currently looking at the funding for Mandarin – our signal gets into China very well and we get a lot of letters from English listeners in China.

Are major broadcasters like the BBC, RFI and the VOA competing for your audience in Africa?

Very much so. The competition is ▶

“ It is important that stories coming out of Africa are not just about war, corruption, famine or dictatorship





very fierce. For the BBC, their largest audience for English is in Africa. We cannot pretend to beat the BBC or VOA, but if you are able to listen to a VON programme you get a refreshingly different perspective that emphasises more the positive side of African development such as democratisation, development projects, increasing levels of accountability and transparency in politics. Of course we don't forget about the situation in Chad, Darfur and Kenya and other crisis flashpoints.

What about the web – what's VON doing in that respect?

I want to achieve full utilisation everywhere in the world. The culture of shortwave listening is dwindling by the day. Our answer to this is audio-streaming of our programming. The over seven million Nigerians in the Diaspora can listen to the stories coming out of Nigeria in their own languages via their computer. This is the future of broadcasting, especially with convergence of computer, radio, TV, mobile phone and so on. We are taking this very seriously.

▲ The West tends to hear bad news stories from Nigeria, such as this oil pipeline explosion. Jijiwa wants to tell a broader story

Is VON going to get into TV?

Absolutely. We have already sent a proposal to the authorities on the subject of VON TV. And we believe we are well placed in terms of personnel to really go into this once we have some equipment. TV is becoming very important – a number of private stations in Nigeria are also going international.

What about getting onto FM across Africa – by setting up local relay stations?

This is one of our big challenges, also for our political leaders. It appears to be more difficult for an African station to have a relay in a fellow African country than for some of the big players from Europe. It is basically a matter of economic clout. Those big Western stations are ready to spend so much money – and we don't have the resources to set up the infrastructure which is required by the rules in a very short time. I have personally proposed that this should be addressed at the political level of our ministers of information so that the rules can be relaxed for fellow African broadcasters.

“ It appears to be more difficult for an African station to have a relay in a fellow African country than for some of the big players from Europe ”

So you need to convince the people that pay the VON budget. How easy is this?

We now have a lot of understanding from the National Assembly, whose responsibility it is to appropriate resources. We are in the process of commissioning the biggest relay station on the African continent, here in Abuja to complement what we have in Lagos.

How do you see the future?

I want what happened in India to happen in Nigeria. Five or ten years ago, the BBC dominated the airwaves in India - today the situation is very different . I want VON to be the authoritative voice of Africa. We should be able to beat some of the bigger players, despite the challenges in technology and so on. The next ten years we will want to convert into positive outcomes for us, especially with the impending digitalisation. When TV comes, we want to be the dominant TV station in Africa.

Abubakar Jijiwa, thank you for talking to The Channel. ■
www.voiceofnigeria.org